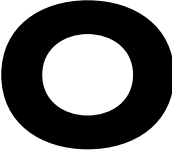


# *Attitudes of Elementary School Principals Toward the Inclusion of Students With Disabilities*

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**ABSTRACT:** *A survey of 408 elementary school principals was conducted to investigate relationships regarding attitudes toward inclusion, variables such as training and experience, and placement perceptions. Results indicate that about 1 in 5 principals' attitudes toward inclusion are positive while most are uncertain. Positive experiences with students with disabilities and exposure to special education concepts are associated with a more positive attitude toward inclusion. Further, principals with more positive attitudes and/or experiences are more likely to place students in less restrictive settings. Differences in placement and experiences were found between disability categories. Results emphasize the importance of inclusionary practices that give principals positive experiences with students of all types of disabilities as well as provide principals with more specific training.*

ver the last 2 decades, inclusion has become a critical part of the reform effort to improve the delivery of services to students with disabilities by focusing on the placement of these students in the general education setting. In an inclusive school, general education does not relinquish responsibility for students with special needs, but instead, works cooperatively with special education to provide a quality program for all students. This new arrangement for providing services has created challenges for many education professionals including the principal.

The role of the school principal has been dramatically changed to include additional duties, personnel, and paperwork. Principals are now expected to design, lead, manage, and imple-

ment programs for all students including those with disabilities (Sage & Burrello, 1994). Administrators are called upon to:

promote visions and values, and to support and encourage positive action on the part of students, teachers, parents, and community members. Other new administrative roles include identifying and articulating the needs of inclusive schools and providing an important link between the schools and the larger community. (Falvey, 1995, p. 10)

For such whole-school reform, a principal's leadership is seen as the key factor to success (Hipp & Huffman, 2000). Therefore, to ensure the success of inclusion, it is important that principals exhibit behaviors that advance the integration, acceptance, and success of students with disabilities in general education classes.

According to Goodlad & Lovitt (1993), the decision to develop an inclusive school depends largely upon leaders' values and beliefs. Leaders demonstrate their beliefs and priorities by the following:

- How they make and honor commitments.
- What they say in formal and informal settings.
- What they express interest in and what questions they ask.
- Where they choose to go and with whom they spend time.
- When they choose to act and how they make their actions known.
- How they organize their staff and their physical surroundings (Nanus, 1992, pp. 139-140).

As the leader in the school, the principal directly influences "resource allocations, staffing, structures, information flows, and operating processes that determine what shall and shall not be done by the organization" (Nanus, 1992, p. 142). Due to their leadership position, principals' attitudes about inclusion could result in either increased opportunities for students to be served in general education or in limited efforts to reduce the segregated nature of special education services. Therefore for inclusion to be successful, first and foremost, the school administrator must display a positive attitude and commitment to inclusion (Evans, Bird, Ford, Green, & Bischoff, 1992; Rude & Anderson, 1992).

Although there has been some research and discussion regarding the importance of principals' attitudes toward inclusion, there is very little that identifies the present state of those attitudes. There is even less research that attempts to identify the influences that develop attitudes toward inclusion or determine the impact principals' attitudes have on placement perceptions. The earlier

studies are also complicated by mixed groups, low numbers, unclear or outdated definitions, and small geographic area representation. This study (Praisner, 2000) was conducted to provide additional research, specifically focusing on principals and inclusion, using a more current definition and conceptual framework. Three research questions guided this study:

1. What are the attitudes of elementary principals toward the inclusion of students with severe/profound disabilities in the general education setting?
2. What is the relationship between principals' personal characteristics, training, experience and/or school characteristics and their attitudes toward inclusion?
3. What is the relationship between principals' perceptions of appropriate placements for students with different types of disabilities and their attitudes and experiences?

## METHODOLOGY

### SAMPLE

The sample consisted of 408 elementary school principals randomly selected from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. They represented schools that enrolled elementary-level students only, normally grades kindergarten through 6. The schools were of varying sizes ranging from less than 250 to over 1,000 students, and the average class size ranged from 10 to over 40. Most schools (47.1%) identified between 6%-10% of the student body as students with disabilities and represented varying degrees of inclusion.

### INSTRUMENT

The Principals and Inclusion Survey (PIS) was designed to determine the extent to which variables such as training, experience, and program factors were related to principals' attitudes. Additionally, the impact of those attitudes on perceived most appropriate placements for students with disabilities was measured. The PIS has four sections: (a) demographics, (b) training and experience, (c) attitudes toward inclusion, and (d) principal beliefs about most appropriate placements. (A copy of the survey is available from the author.)

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The demographics of the school were measured in Section I. Two questions addressing the school included the number of all students in the building and the average class size. Additionally, two questions focusing on students with disabilities included the approximate percentage of students with individualized education programs (IEPs) in the building (excluding gifted), and the approximate number of students with IEPs in the building that are included in regular education classrooms for at least 75% of their school day (excluding gifted).

Section II had 13 questions designed to gather data on variables that could potentially influence a principal's attitude toward inclusion. Questions pertaining to the principal included (a) age, (b) gender, (c) years of full-time regular education teaching experience, (d) years of full-time special education teaching experience, (e) years as an elementary school principal, (f) number of special education credits in formal training, (g) number of inservice hours in inclusive practices, (h) certification in special education, (i) number of relevant content areas in formal training, and (j) personal experience with an individual with a disability outside school settings. Two program factors, existence of a mission statement that includes a vision for inclusion and a specific plan to deal with crisis involving students with special needs, were also included. To ensure the validity of this section, the content was based on a review of inclusion literature to identify those factors that might relate to education professionals' attitudes toward inclusion. Additionally, a panel of four experts reviewed the questions. The final question in this section was presented as a chart to elicit an overall impression of the types of experiences principals had with individuals from each disability category. Principals were asked to rate their experiences from negative to positive or no experience with each disability category. Additionally, an overall Experience Score was calculated for each principal based upon an aggregation of those ratings for all 11 categories. The disability categories used included (a) specific learning disability, (b) mental retardation, (c) serious emotional disturbance, (d) blindness/visual impairment, (e) deafness/hearing impairment, (f) speech and language impairment, (g) other health impairment, (h) physical disability, (i) multihand-

icap, (j) autism/pervasive developmental disorder, and (k) neurological impairment.

In Section III, the 10 questionnaire items of the Superintendents' Attitude Survey on Integration (SASI), adapted by Stainback (1986) from the Autism Attitude Scale for Teachers (Olley, Devellis, Devellis, Wall, & Long, 1981), were used to measure attitude toward inclusion for students with severe/profound disabilities. For each statement concerning an aspect of inclusion for students with severe/profound disabilities, the respondent answered on a 5-point Likert scale with the following options: strongly agree, agree, uncertain, disagree, strongly disagree. For each principal, individual item scores and a total Attitude Score were determined. Stainback addressed the validity of this section through a panel of experts and the reliability coefficient was reported as 0.899 for this series of questions.

Section IV was designed to measure principals' perceptions about the most appropriate placements for students of different disability categories. For each disability category, the respondent chose 1 of 6 different placements that he or she believed to be most appropriate for that type of student. The placement options were as follows: (a) special education services outside the regular school, (b) special class for most or all of school day, (c) part-time special class, (d) regular education class instruction and resource room, (e) regular education class instruction for most of the day, and (f) full-time regular education with support. Based upon the responses, an Inclusiveness Score for each principal was determined as well as average responses for each disability category. The validity of this section was founded on the currently available options and categories as identified by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania through special education services as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 1990) and subsequent Regulations (34 CFR Part 300).

The survey, consisting of 28 questions, was mailed to 750 elementary principals randomly chosen for the study. Each participant received a packet that included a cover letter requesting his or her participation, a survey, a stamped addressed postcard, and a stamped return envelope. The postcard containing identifying information was mailed separately when the survey was com-

pleted to allow for a second mailing and to ensure the anonymity of the respondents. The return rate was 54% after two mailings.

#### *DATA ANALYSIS*

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data, present data summaries, and to examine the relationships among the variables. Frequency distributions and percentages were computed for each variable of the survey. For the experience question, the frequency distribution and percentages were determined for each experience type across all disabilities as well as for each disability category. The frequencies and percentages were reported for each placement across all disabilities as well as for each disability category in Section IV. Central tendency data were calculated for the question on formal training topics and for the Attitude Score. Additionally, a Pearson-Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) or a Point-Biserial Correlation (PBC) was computed between each variable and the attitudes of the elementary principals to determine if there was a significant relationship at the .05 level of significance.

### **RESULTS**

#### *ATTITUDES OF ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS TOWARD INCLUSION*

One purpose of this investigation was to determine the attitudes of elementary principals toward the inclusion of students with special needs. The principals' attitudes were measured using Section III of the Principals and Inclusion Survey. The total score from this section had a possible range from 10 to 50, where lower scores indicated less favorable attitudes while higher scores indicated more favorable attitudes toward inclusion. Scores ranged from 14 to 50 with a mean of 34.8, a standard deviation of 7.0, a median of 36, and a modal score of 38. In this sample, 21.1% of the principals were clearly positive about inclusion and 2.7% were negative. The Attitude Scores for 76.6% of the respondents were within the uncertain range, not strongly positive or negative but generally skewed toward a positive attitude.

Responses to the specific items of the attitude scale indicate that most principals agree with the idea of inclusion when it is phrased in a generic and unregulated manner. However, less favorable attitudes arise when the wording becomes specific and implies mandatory compliance rather than voluntary participation. This disparity in the item responses seems to account for the large number of Attitude Scores that were within the uncertain range.

#### *CORRELATES OF PRINCIPALS' ATTITUDE TOWARD INCLUSION SCORES*

The research questions in Section II were designed to explore the relationship between variables potentially associated with principals and their attitudes toward inclusion. A PPMC coefficient was computed for those variables that were continuous (e.g., years of experience, age, credits in training) while the PBC was computed for the dichotomous variables such as gender and certification in special education. The probability level for statistically significant results was defined as an alpha of at least .05. Significant positive correlations were found between attitude toward inclusion and the number of special education credits ( $r = 0.09$ ), inservice hours ( $r = 0.18$ ), specific topics taken ( $r = 0.22$ ), and the Experience Score ( $r = 0.35$ ). Table 1 displays correlation coefficients for all variables.

The Experience Score was calculated by summing each individual's responses for the type of experience with students from all disability categories. Each of the 11 disability categories was rated on a scale from -2 for negative experience to 2 for positive experience, yielding a possible total score range from -22 to 22. Therefore, the higher the Experience Score, the more positive the principal's experiences across all categories. There was a significant correlation ( $r = 0.35$ ) between the Experience Score and Attitude Score; that is, the more positive an individual's overall experiences with individuals with disabilities, the more positive the attitude.

The type of specific topics important to special education and inclusion included in preparation programs was also investigated. Data were collected by number of topics taken as well as the specific topic covered in the principals' formal training such as courses, workshops, and/or significant portions of courses (10% of content or more). With a possible range of 0 to 14, the mean number of

**TABLE 1**  
*Correlation Coefficients Between Dependent Variables and Attitude Score*

Variable	n	r	r <sub>pb</sub>
Experience score	408	0.35	**
Number of specific topics	408	0.22	**
Inservice hours	407	0.18	**
Special education credits	408	0.09	*
Age	406	-0.07	
Years teaching regular education	407	-0.05	
Years teaching special education	406	-0.02	
Years as elementary principal	408	0.01	
Gender	408		0.01
Special education certification	408		-0.01
Crisis plan	404		-0.01
Personal experience	402		-0.05
Vision	398		-0.03

\*  $p = .05$ . \*\*  $p < .05$ .

topics taken was 6.23 with a standard deviation of 3.28 and a modal score of 4. Only 2% of the principals had taken all of the topics surveyed. There was no single topic that had been taken by all principals. As shown in Table 2, most principals participated in training on special education law (83.6%), the characteristics of students with disabilities (77.7%), and behavior management (62%). Few received instruction in life skills (13.2%), family intervention (15.7%), eliciting parent and community support for inclusion (16.2%), or had participated in field-based experiences with actual inclusion activities (18.4%).

The number of inservice training hours in inclusive practices and the number of special education credits in formal training that a principal had completed were also significantly related to the Attitude Score (see Table 1). Specifically, the more hours and credits taken the more positive the attitude toward inclusion.

*PLACEMENT PERCEPTIONS*

When analyzing placements across disabilities, the most appropriate placements selected by the principals were distributed across the entire continuum of services. Full-time regular education with support was chosen most often (29.6%) and special education services outside regular education school least (6.0%). All of the

options in regular education settings (full-time with support, for most of the day, or with resource room) accounted for 59.9% of the placements chosen.

*ATTITUDES AND PLACEMENT PERCEPTIONS*

To explore the possible relationship between attitude and placement perceptions, a PPMC coefficient was calculated between the Attitude and Inclusiveness Scores. The Inclusiveness Score was calculated based upon a value between 1 and 6 given for the range of placements from most to least restrictive. Total scores ranged from 11 (most restrictive) to 66 (most inclusive). A significant positive relationship between attitude and inclusiveness was found ( $r = 0.37, p < .05$ ). Thus, the more positive the attitude toward inclusion, the more inclusive the placements selected. It should be noted that 11 individuals declined to answer Section IV, which yielded the Inclusiveness Score, because they felt placement decisions should be made on an individual basis only and not on a general case.

*RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EXPERIENCE AND PLACEMENT*

A PPMC was computed between the Experience score and the Inclusiveness score. A significant positive correlation between experience and inclusiveness was obtained ( $r = 0.34, p < .05$ ). Thus, the more positive the experiences with

**TABLE 2**  
*Specific Topics Covered in Preparation Programs by Topic (n = 408)*

<i>By Topic</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Special education law	341	83.6
Characteristics of students with disabilities	317	77.7
Behavior management class for working with students with disabilities	253	62.0
Fostering teacher collaboration	237	58.1
Teambuilding	219	53.7
Change process	215	52.7
Supporting and training teachers to handle inclusion	198	48.5
Crisis intervention	196	48.0
Academic programming for students with disabilities	184	45.1
Interagency cooperation	122	29.9
Field-based experiences with actual inclusion activities	75	18.4
Eliciting parent and community support for inclusion	66	16.2
Family intervention training	64	15.7
Life skills training for students with disabilities	54	13.2

students with disabilities the more likely the principal was to choose less restrictive settings. This relationship was also found for every disability category although the strength of the association varied.

#### *DIFFERENCES ASSOCIATED WITH DISABILITY CATEGORY*

Two differences were identified between disability categories. First, the perceived most appropriate placements varied considerably depending upon the disability category. Least restrictive placements in regular education were chosen most often for the categories of speech and language impairment (93.7%), physical disability (87.4%), other health impairment (84.9%), specific learning disability (81.9%), deaf/hearing impairment (74.5%), and blind/visual impairments (71.9%). Regular education settings were chosen less frequently for serious emotional disturbance (20.4%) and autism (30.1%).

The most segregated settings of special education services outside regular education schools and special classes were chosen by more than half of the respondents for serious emotional disturbance (63.6%) and autism/pervasive developmental disorder (49.8%). Approximately one third of respondents would place students with mental retardation (29.4%), neurological impairment

(36.9%), or multihandicaps (39.1%) in such restricted settings. Other disability categories such as specific learning disability (1.8%) and speech and language impairment (1.6%) resulted in almost no responses in these two settings. Part-time special education and regular education class and resource room options were chosen largely for students with specific learning disability (62.0%) and mental retardation (59.7%).

The second difference found between disability categories was responses for types of experiences with students with disabilities. The category of serious emotional disturbance was the only category that had a large number of somewhat negative to negative experiences (51.4%). No experience accounted for only 4% of its responses. A high percentage of no experience responses was recorded for neurological impairment (36.5%), blind/visual impairment (36.1%), multihandicap (36.0%), autism/pervasive developmental disorder (28.3%), and deaf/hearing impairment (27.8%).

#### **DISCUSSION**

Inclusion has become a critical part of the reform effort to improve the delivery of services to students with disabilities by focusing on the placement of these students in general education

classes. The literature on inclusion has identified a number of roles and responsibilities for principals that are necessary to create and sustain successful inclusion settings. However, the degree to which administrators support change efforts is often determined by the attitudes and values they hold. Therefore, if inclusion is to be a feasible alternative to more segregated placements, its success will depend heavily upon the readiness and willingness of general education administrators to make decisions that will provide appropriate opportunities for students with special needs to remain in general education (Ayres & Meyer, 1992).

This study was conducted to improve our understanding of principals' attitudes toward inclusion, the factors related to attitudes, and their potential impact upon the placement of students with disabilities. The findings demonstrate the importance of principals' attitudes in the inclusion of students with disabilities. Three areas related to attitudes toward inclusion warrant additional research and focus: (a) factors related to placement perceptions, (b) role of experience with students with disabilities, and (c) types of training in inclusive practices.

#### *FACTORS RELATED TO PLACEMENT PERCEPTIONS*

Although placement decisions for students with disabilities are made by each student's IEP team, the behavior and perceptions of the principal strongly influence placement decisions. Furthermore, a principal's support is necessary for the successful implementation of inclusion. As shown in this study, principals with more positive attitudes toward inclusion were more likely to believe that less restrictive placements were most appropriate for students with disabilities. McAneny (1992) reported a similar relationship between attitude and placement decisions regarding mainstreaming. The moderate strength of this finding emphasizes the importance of principals' attitudes toward inclusion. With such a powerful impact on programming, it is important that attitudes and attitude development become an integral part of the evaluation and professional development process for building administrators.

The disability category or label that a student carries was also related to the recommended placement. Students with serious emotional dis-

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turbance, autism/pervasive developmental, mental retardation, neurological impairment, and multi-handicaps were particularly likely to be placed in a more restrictive setting. Evidently, elementary school principals believe that certain disability categories, such as those without emotional or social needs and who tend to "fit in" academically, are more appropriate for inclusive settings. This is in stark contrast to the idea of full inclusion where everyone has an opportunity to be educated within the general education setting. In 1998, Barnett and Monda-Amaya also found that principals generally viewed inclusion as most appropriate for students with mild disabilities. These results are commensurate with data included in the Twenty-Second Annual Report to Congress (Office of Special Education Programs, 2000), which indicated a disparity across disability categories with students with significant disabilities in more restrictive settings. Consequently, extra attention needs to be paid to these groups to facilitate increased inclusion.

#### *ROLE OF EXPERIENCE*

The type of experiences with students with disabilities proved to be important; the more positive the experiences, the more positive a principal's attitude was toward inclusion. This finding supports previous research (Villa, Thousand, Meyers, & Nevin, 1996; Wisniewski & Alper, 1994) that showed experience with individuals with disabilities is related to positive attitudes toward inclusion. However, this study and others (McAneny, 1992; Villa et al.) found no significant relationships between attitude and years of experience in regular education, special education, or elementary administration. It seems apparent that the nature of experiences in a school setting and not the amount of experience, is connected to attitudes toward inclusion.

The types of experiences principals had with students with disabilities varied by the disability category, although most experiences were categorized as somewhat positive to positive or having had no experience. Students with serious emotional disturbance were an exception with almost equal percentages of positive and negative experiences. In order to change the perceptions of principals toward groups such as serious emotional disturbance, autism/pervasive developmental disorder, and/or multihandicaps, it is essential to provide principals with positive experiences with individuals from all disability categories.

Positive experiences with students with disabilities were also associated with placement. The more positive the experiences with students with disabilities the more those principals chose less restrictive placements. This relationship was found for all of the disability categories including serious emotional disturbance and autism. Therefore, although some students with disabilities might not be seen as initially suited for general education, with more positive experiences, principals seem to become more open to including all students.

#### *TYPES OF TRAINING*

Preparation programs and inservice training programs for principals need to address inclusion as part of their required curriculum. As shown in this study, exposure to special education concepts through special education credits and inservice training were related to a more positive attitude toward inclusion. There is no previous research that specifically relates special education credits to attitude; therefore, additional research is needed to validate this particular finding. However, Hegler (1995) and Stoler (1992) found a relationship between inservice hours and attitude for administrators; and the literature emphasizes the importance of special education coursework for the development of more positive attitudes (Greyerbiehl, 1993; Hyatt, 1987, Valesky & Hirth, 1992).

This study shows that for these principals, preparation programs provided them with only a small part of the knowledge base deemed by experts in special education as important to the implementation of inclusion. The majority of

principals had taken only 4 to 6 of the 14 identified topics. General special education information such as characteristics of disabilities, special education law, and behavior management may be adequately covered, but specific topics that address actual strategies and processes that support inclusion seem to be lacking. Patterson, Bowling, and Marshall (2000) support these findings and conclude that principals are ill-trained for inclusion and special education leadership.

The lack of specific training in special education topics is not surprising, considering the amount of coursework that is necessary to receive a degree in administration. These topics are important, however, as they were related to a principal's attitude toward inclusion. The more topics that principals had as part of their formal training such as courses, workshops, and/or significant portions of courses (10% of content or more), the more positive their attitudes were toward inclusion. Further research is necessary to replicate the relationship between training content and attitudes as well as to determine which specific topics are important for principal preparation. The reality is that school administrators need to take part in the development and implementation of inclusion programs and therefore need to be adequately prepared to do so.

#### *LIMITATIONS*

A concern with this study is its focus on only one state and on only elementary principals. Although this may weaken the scope of the research, it was deemed necessary to restrict the sample in order to reduce the number of variables and thereby provide clearer results. Additionally, the use of the full inclusion perspective, the inclusion of students with severe/profound disabilities, in the attitude scale may have reduced the "strength" of positive attitudes toward inclusion. However, this perspective was utilized as it was most likely to polarize responses and thereby produce statistically significant findings. Finally, another limitation results from the assumption that all principals work under the same conditions. In practice, a principal's level of control and ability to experiment may be influenced by legal requirements, district policies, and other specific issues that vary by setting.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The findings of this study demonstrate the importance of principals' attitudes for the successful inclusion of students with disabilities. The elementary principals' placement perceptions were, in part, related to their attitudes toward inclusion. Therefore, when school districts hire and/or evaluate elementary principals, consideration of their attitudes toward inclusion should be an integral part of the process. An awareness of factors related to attitude is also necessary to assist principals in developing a favorable attitude toward inclusion.

### INVESTIGATE CATEGORY DIFFERENCES

The results of this research establish that principals have different experiences and perceptions of appropriate placements depending upon the student's disability category. Placement decisions are made based upon these beliefs and experiences and therefore certain disability groups are not given equal opportunity to be placed in general education classes. In order to change the perceptions of principals toward groups like serious emotional disturbance, autism/pervasive developmental disorder, and/or multihandicaps, it is essential to provide principals with positive experiences with individuals from *all* disability categories. Also, successful environments should be evaluated to determine the skills and strategies necessary for the inclusion of each disability group. Additionally, a more in-depth look at principals' specific perceptions of each disability group would be beneficial.

### IMPROVE PRINCIPAL PREPARATION

Too often, principals who are prepared well to administer general education programs are made responsible for a broad range of special education programs in areas in which they have had minimal training and/or experience (Anderson & Decker, 1993). Preparation programs and inservice training programs for principals need to address inclusion as part of their required curriculum. Principals require specific training that is designed to meet their needs as building administrators, especially regarding their leadership role in inclusion. This study shows that general special education information such as characteristics of disabilities, special education law, and behavior management may be ade-

quately covered. However, specific topics that address actual strategies and processes that support inclusion are lacking. University and college preparation programs as well as inservice training components should be carefully examined to determine how to include more of the topics identified in Table 2 in their current offerings.

Professional development opportunities within the district should also include opportunities to observe and take part in the successful inclusion of students with disabilities through the support of the director of special education, teaching staff, and outside consultants. Including principals as integral team members will enable them to develop an understanding for the individual needs of students as well as the skills and strategies necessary to make inclusion work. In addition, whenever possible, principals should be provided a mentor or peer partner to assist them with the development or improvement of inclusive practices.

### ENSURE POSITIVE EXPERIENCES

The findings of this study emphasize the importance of implementing quality inclusion programs and not "dumping" students with disabilities into general education classes. They also suggest that care must be taken in establishing inclusion settings in resistant environments. To do so, the special education and general education staff in each educational environment must strive to collaboratively develop the knowledge and skills required to identify and articulate their particular needs. Experiences with students with disabilities must be carefully crafted to increase the number of positive encounters that principals have with these students. Additionally, principals should be given opportunities to observe and model administrator and teacher behaviors in successful inclusion settings.

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